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ABSTRACT

The dichotomy between Insiders (for whom the community college sector provides a primary reference) and Outsiders (for whom organizations other than those within the community college world constitute a primary reference) provides a meaningful way of understanding claims about the role of the community college as an institution. Reactions of community college Insiders to the criticisms of Outsiders have been variously characterized as paranoid, suspicious, defensive, hostile, and emotional. These kinds of negative responses might be modified through a sociology of knowledge approach, which would highlight the differences in the education and work socialization experiences of community college Insiders and research university Outsiders. Each side's experiences suggest different questions and different foci of interest. Insiders point to the contributions the community college has made to the lives of students, while Outsiders are critical of its role in reproducing the American class structure. Insiders have a greater awareness of individual student mobility, while Outsiders look at group mobility and structural levels. Outcome measurements also differ, with Insiders pointing to employment rates and basic skills, and Outsiders focusing on graduation rates. To take advantage of the possibility of Insider/Outsider communication, a number of modifications in the academic reward/research/publication system may be necessary. These could include Insiders and Outsiders using one another as trusted assessors and informal collaborators, publishing in each other's journals, and inviting each other to join their editorial boards. Given the right conditions, Insiders and Outsiders will strive to prevent stagnation and develop a more comprehensive understanding of the community college. (EJV)

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Toward a More Comprehensive Understanding
of the Community College*

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Toward a More Comprehensive Understanding of
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Abstract

It is suggested that in general as a result of different professional socialization and current work experiences, individuals affiliated with community colleges (Insiders) and individuals affiliated with other institutions (Outsiders) have different foci of interest concerning the community college. Ways of overcoming these limitations and developing a more comprehensive understanding are proposed.

The sociologist Robert K. Merton has paraphrased Karl Marx and has stated: "Insiders and Outsiders in the domain of knowledge, unite. You have nothing to lose but your claims. You have a world of understanding to win" (1972, p.44). Although any dichotomy may be limited in its ability to reflect the complexity of social reality, in this paper it is suggested that the Insider-Outsider dichotomy provides a meaningful way of understanding claims about the role of the community college as an institution. It is also suggested that Merton's analysis provides an insight into the way in which a more comprehensive understanding of that institution can be developed.

For our purposes Insiders can be viewed as individuals for whom the community college sector provides a primary reference group. Such individuals include those affiliated with a community college, with community college journals, or with community college associations. In contrast, Outsiders can be viewed as individuals for whom organizations other than those within the community college world constitute a primary reference group. Such individuals are likely to be associated with research universities. They are frequently found in sociology departments or have degrees from sociology departments, e.g., Burton Clark, David Riesman, Jerome Karabel, Fred Pincus. One somewhat anomalous group includes university-affiliated individuals who teach in community college programs,

e.g., S. V. Martorana, L. W. Bender, R. C. Richardson, Jr. Both the community college and the university are significant reference groups for these professors. For the purposes of this discussion, these individuals will be classified as Insiders.

Both Merton's work and this essay are framed within the tradition of the sociology of knowledge. One insight of this tradition is that knowledge can be understood in terms of social organization and social structure rather than on personal and individual bases. Analyses based on this insight might help to modify the response of members of the community college sector to criticisms of that sector. George Vaughan has suggested that while many community college leaders were trained in disciplines which emphasized the role of criticism, "yet when it comes to the community college movement and especially to the role a single college plays in that movement, a certain paranoia seems to emanate from community college leaders" (1980, p.13). Steven Zwerling, author of the critical book Second Best: The Crisis of the Community College (1976), was greeted at the 1979 meeting of the American Association of Community and Junior Colleges with a reaction that was "mostly defensive and even hostile, one administrator rising to say publicly at the close of the session, 'I think Mr. Zwerling is second best'" (cited in Johnston, 1980, p.43). Insiders should be equipped to evaluate and to respond to the criticism of Outsiders without resorting to ad hominem

arguments. Vaughan has also made the point that social critics of the community college must be answered in a "scholarly manner rather than an emotional one" (1979, p.10). Ad hominem and emotional arguments do not enhance the status of community colleges, their faculties and staffs, or their students. Community colleges form an increasingly significant component of the world of higher education and therefore are likely to attract the attention of an increasingly large number of Outsider analysts. The view of the community college held by decision makers and gatekeepers associated with four-year colleges and universities as well as individuals associated with other public and private agencies will be influenced by Outsider analyses and Insider reactions.

C. Wright Mills has provided a model example of the applicability of the sociology of knowledge to scholarly works. In an examination of the theoretical, methodological, and political orientations presented in textbooks in the field of social disorganization, Mills argued:

If members of an academic profession are recruited from similar contexts and if their backgrounds and careers are relatively similar, there is a tendency for them to be uniformly set for some common perspective (1943, p.167).

Mills concluded with the observation: "The common conditions of their profession often seem more important in this

connection than similarity of extraction (1943, p.167). Differences in perspectives are not to be explained on the basis of conscious distortion or conspiracies, but rather on the basis of an understanding that common educational and work experiences lead to common viewpoints. Conversely, different educational and work experiences lead to different perspectives or viewpoints.

In an overview of the writings of a number of critics of the community college, Vaughan states: "These scholars, with the exception of Steven Zwerling, view the community college from an external vantage point. As 'outsiders,' their writings have often been suspect by the supporters of the community college" (1980, p.1). He continues on to point out that "Zwerling is the only critic discussed in the chapter who viewed the community college from an insider vantage point" (Vaughan, 1980, pp.8-9). Although Zwerling had been affiliated with Staten Island Community College, he has more recently been associated with New York University. David Riesman's affiliation has been Harvard, Burton Clark's UCLA, Fred Pincus's the University of Maryland and Jerome Karabel's has been Harvard and more recently Berkeley.

Studies in the sociology of higher education and science indicate that individuals affiliated with research universities are likely to have undergone a common socialization experience at such universities and to work in settings containing common values, expectations, and rewards. They are particularly subject

to pressure associated with the publish or perish phenomenon. There is internal pressure as a result of professional socialization, as well as external pressure emanating from colleagues and employers. If the internal pressure involves self-esteem, the external pressure involves the achievement of tenure, income, status, and prestige. The community college has provided Insiders and Outsiders with publishing opportunities and therefore with opportunities for career advancement.

Neither Insiders nor Outsiders have a monopoly on truth. However, their different educational and career experiences suggest different questions and different foci of interest. For instance, while many Insiders point to the contributions that community colleges have made to the lives of students, Outsiders have been critical of the role of the community college in reproducing the American class structure. Insiders are likely to have daily contact with community college students and therefore are aware of examples of individual mobility. At the same time, it is reasonable to assume that Outsiders would look at the group and structural levels and ask questions about group mobility and class structure. The interests of Outsiders may also be determined by the fact that many of them are sociologists or economists. Another area in which Insiders and Outsiders are likely to ask different questions concerns outcome measurements. Outsiders are likely to point to graduation rates as the most significant outcome measure, while Insiders may point to employment rates, increases in basic

skills, and employment advancement as significant outcome measures. An example from this area is provided in the comments of Cohen and Brawer:

The traditional method of measuring the worth of a school has been to gauge the value it adds to its students. Measures of what the students know when they enter and of what they know when they leave are the classic assessment strategies ... But many community college people are convinced that their institution should no longer be assessed in that way. They feel they have moved into another sphere, one in which the institution is less concerned with traditional teaching and learning than with providing access, credentials, and connections. Accordingly, when Astin suggested that the two-year colleges were detrimental to students' passage through the system toward the baccalaureate degree, the college spokespersons reacted uproariously (Cohen and Brawer, 1982, pp.362-363).

The Astin referred to is the UCLA professor of higher education, Alexander W. Astin.

The fact that Insiders and Outsiders may have different foci of interest, does not mean that they cannot communicate

across perspectives and thus develop a more comprehensive understanding. The ability of Insiders and Outsiders to interact and influence one another is greatly enhanced by the fact that they are both members of the larger academic/scholarly community. The norms of that community require the application of universalistic standards in the evaluation of ideas. Although this norm may be violated through the application of particularistic criteria, e.g., professional and personal characteristics, it is still a norm and as such plays a significant role in the academic/scholarly community.

In the postscript of his well-known discussion of paradigms and their role in scientific revolutions, Kuhn approaches the issue of communication breakdowns between groups of scientists working with different paradigms. He argues that members of each group should recognize the other as members of different language communities and then become translators. Such translation, "allows the participants in a communication breakdown to experience vicariously something of the merits and defects of each other's points of view" (Kuhn, 1970, p.202). Although Kuhn's interest is in the phenomenon of paradigm shifts and ours in the development of a more comprehensive understanding of the community college, Kuhn's discussions of professional socialization, communication breakdown, incommensurability of paradigms and social organization of research groups provide valuable and applicable insights.

In order to take advantage of the possibility of the development of Insider/Outsider communication and synthesis, it may be necessary to institute a number of modifications in the academic reward/research/publication system. Insiders and Outsiders could use one another as trusted assessors and informal collaborators of their work at each stage in its development. Each could also attempt to reach an audience comprised of members of the other group. At present, Outsiders are not likely to receive rewards for publishing in community college journals. One way to change this is to invite Outsiders to publish in these journals. If prominent Outsiders were to accept this invitation, the status of these journals would increase among Outsiders. At the same time, Insiders are not likely to publish in Outsider journals. This may reflect a reluctance to submit manuscripts for publication consideration. It also appears that few Insiders are on the editorial boards of Outsider journals, that is, general higher education journals. In each of these cases, gatekeepers of appropriate journals could have an impact if they were to solicit manuscripts from members of the other group.

The general point has been well expressed by Velho and Krige in their examination of the relative isolation of Brazilian agricultural scientists: "Without critical debate and interaction with people having different points of view, and from outside one's own narrow circle, intellectual and

scientific stagnation is more or less inevitable" (1984, p.59).

There is every reason to believe that, given the right conditions, Insiders and Outsiders will strive to prevent stagnation and develop a more comprehensive understanding of the community college.

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